

## **IV. Commission's Blueprint for Ending Hunger in Maine**

An end to hunger in Maine can be achieved by setting bold targets and working diligently toward their accomplishment. It will not be achieved simply by spending more, by creating more food pantries, or by increasing services to those at risk, though such approaches may be necessary in the short term.

Rather, an end to hunger will be achieved by making strategic and fundamental changes in public policy that affect the disposable income of families and the access of citizens to basic services that enable them to improve their lives, that increase access to locally grown foods, that ensure the dignity and well being of all Maine citizens, and that address changing demographic, social, technological and lifestyle trends.

Though food is the single factor central to ending hunger, hunger is much more than a food issue. The recommendations placed forward in this report reflect the breadth of policies and actions that have a role and a contribution to make to ending hunger in Maine.

The Commission believes that ending hunger in Maine requires five critical steps:

1. A firm resolve to end hunger in Maine that is reflected in public policy and action,
2. An economy that ensures the economic security of Maine citizens,
3. A food policy that recognizes the link between food production and distribution systems and resources, and access to locally produced food and that takes significant steps to increase the consumption of Maine grown food,
4. Major updating and restructuring of many current services and programs to respond to a changing world, and
5. A guarantee of dignity to all citizens and an accessible and seamless system of services to those in need.

## **1. *Maine's Resolve to End Hunger.***

State government and the public policies established by government have a major role in how the problem of hunger is approached and addressed and how the State moves forward to end hunger within its borders. There is overwhelming evidence that the cost of treating the effects of hunger is great and weighs heavily on the cost of government services. The benefits of ending hunger are “priceless”. If we are to make lasting change, Maine must resolve to make a significant paradigm shift in its approach to hunger and in the public policies that contribute to hunger in the State.

The problem of hunger in Maine must be made central to public policy debates and decisions. We must understand and approach hunger as much more than a social problem or a manifestation of poverty and acknowledge its far-reaching implications for many other aspects of the quality of life in Maine.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

#### **1. Establish a State policy to end hunger in Maine.**

The Maine Legislature should state clearly its resolve to end hunger in Maine and ensure Maine moves steadfastly toward achieving an end to hunger by requiring that all future legislation, governmental policies, and public actions meet the criteria or test of leading to an end to hunger.

#### **2. Revise and adopt an active and updated Maine Food Policy that reflects food security needs and moves the State toward greater food self-reliance.**

In 1984 the Maine Legislature enacted A Food Policy for Maine. The policy is a comprehensive document that provides a blueprint for sustaining and strengthening Maine's agricultural industry, improving the level of nutrition and health of Maine residents, and for ensuring the many components of Maine's food system from producer to consumer are coordinated and integrated.

Because of the importance of a strong bond between Maine's food production capacity and the level of food security and quality of nutrition of its citizens, the Commission believes it essential to update and revitalize this important document. The Commission is especially concerned that Maine's Food Policy include a food security component and contain guidance and mechanisms for implementation and for periodic measurement of results.

### **3. Establish a Maine Office of Food Security.**

The Commission has found that an end to hunger requires the participation of everyone and, though many are not typically perceived in this context, the policies and programs implemented by agencies throughout state government have an important role to play in ending hunger. It is time to bring all the players to the table to understand and address the complexities of hunger in a coordinated and comprehensive manner.

## **2. Economic Security.**

Maine households have the lowest disposable income in New England. Wages are lower and taxes are higher in Maine. Maine is a rural state. The cost of transportation to meet the most basic needs of getting to school, stores, or work takes a larger bite of the household income. Higher energy and heating costs, the rising cost of prescription drugs, lack of adequate benefits, and a slowing of investment in affordable housing all have lead to increasing demands on the income of families and individuals leaving little left for food and other necessities.

In addition, the federal welfare reform that began in 1996 has essentially ended the era of welfare programs that once allowed mothers of small children to remain at home and provide for their care and has replaced it with a new premise that a poor mother's place is at work. Even during times when jobs are plentiful in Maine, many do not offer adequate wages or benefits to provide the support families need in order succeed in the workplace. Most basic of these are a dependable vehicle or transportation service and safe and affordable care for their children.

Opportunities for employment with better benefits and higher wages are often out of the reach of lower income households because they lack a reliable vehicle or a secure child care arrangement. These barriers limit choices and opportunities and keep many in part time positions or in jobs that are closer to their home but pay poorly. As a result, many Maine families have made a transition from welfare poor to working poor. Now more than ever, to prevent poverty among one-parent families, support for child care, transportation, health care and other needs must be solidly in place.

### **Strategy #1**

Ensure all working citizens a livable wage.



### **Immediate Legislative Action**

#### **1. Beginning in 2004, increase the minimum wage by \$.50 per hour annually until the minimum wage reaches a "living wage" and index to the CPI.**

The minimum wage was raised from \$5.15 to \$6.25 by the 120th legislature over a two-year period. The minimum wage increased to \$5.75 per hour on November 1, 2001 and will increase to \$6.25 on January 1, 2003. This is a critical first step. However, a living wage for a family of three is currently more than double this amount. A third of the jobs in Maine do not

pay a living wage. Yet, the number of single parent families and single person households dependent on a single income continues to rise.

## **Strategy #2**

**Increase the disposable income of Maine households through actions that reduce the cost volatility of essential goods and services and basic needs.**



### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

Factors that affect the disposable income of Maine households are beyond the scope and specific mission of this Commission. Yet they are critical to ending hunger because it is well known that people make tradeoffs in their efforts to make ends meet. These tradeoffs are usually between purchasing sufficient food and meeting other needs such as buying fuel or medicine or paying the rent.

**1. Thus while the Commission offers no specific recommendation concerning these other necessities, we believe that Maine should move with urgency to ensure that Maine has:**

- a. A comprehensive energy policy that protects citizens from volatile prices, ensures stable, secure and affordable energy supply and that reduces dependence on non-renewable resources;
- b. A comprehensive health care program for all that ensures affordable health care, including prescription drug coverage; and
- c. An affordable housing policy for Maine that makes it possible for people to live in traditional neighborhoods, live near their jobs and near the services they need.

### **Future Actions for Consideration**

1. Increase investment in programs to improve housing for low income households, especially increasing access to affordable insulation and related materials that reduce the cost of heat and basic household operation.
2. Develop strategies that will improve the quality of affordable rental housing in downtown and urban areas such as:

- a. Develop a “TIF” style program of property tax incentives to rental unit owners who improve the quality of housing rented to low and moderate income households. Unlike TIFs commonly used to stimulate economic development which usually increase the demand for services paid for with tax dollars such as fire, police, highways and public works, a tax break for improved housing should not cost the municipality but rather result in a savings of tax dollars. Safe and comfortable housing will pay for itself because it has a positive effect on quality of life, such as lower fire potential, fewer family conflicts resulting in domestic violence, better school performance of children with a safe and comfortable place to study and relate to family.

### **Strategy #3**

**Make the tax system fair and based on ability to pay by re-establishing greater progressivity in Maine’s tax structure.**

Though the income tax is a progressive tax that increases with income, it still is difficult for families with low wages and little disposable income to pay. The Commission has found that all too often other tax policies, fees and assessments levied by the State are structured in such a way that the low income and working households pay more in proportion to their income. Taxes on phone service, or related to owning and operating a motor vehicle (gasoline tax, excise and sales taxes, etc.), for instance, hit lower income households harder.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

- 1. Increase the EITC to 25% of the federal level over a 3-year period and make it refundable.**
- 2. Commission a study to evaluate the impact of taxes, fees and other assessments on lower income households and propose remedies.**

### **Future Actions for Consideration**

1. Eliminate the telephone tax on basic phone service.

2. Examine options for increasing the homestead exemption.
3. Identify and take steps to reduce the property tax burden.
4. Create a state child care tax credit for lower income households (possibly refundable).
5. Eliminate the marriage penalty in the tax system.
6. Raise the base level at which families must pay income tax.
7. Eliminate the sales tax on basic materials for home repairs, auto repairs, and related necessities.
8. Reduce the gasoline tax.

#### **Strategy # 4**

Ensure that small businesses have the same access to incentives and assistance as available to larger firms.



#### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

##### **1. Amend the "Responsible Employer Statute" to close loopholes and to increase opportunity for small businesses in Maine.**

Reinstate the "Responsible Bid" language in State bidding procedures and expand the definition of "lowest bid" for goods, services, and capital construction, and ensure that Maine workers receive priority in hiring for contracts in Maine.

Establish incentives for groups or consortiums of small employer/businesses to enter into cooperative schemes to provide services and benefits to their workers such as child care opportunities and group purchasing of health insurance for affected employees.

#### **Future Actions for Consideration**

1. Ensure that all state business assistance programs demand corporate accountability in return for incentives to business.

2. Link state offered business incentives to adequate wages, benefits to workers, child care, training, transportation assistance or other appropriate support for workers.
3. Provide tax incentives to help small businesses provide basic services to workers, including tax incentives and other state-offered incentives available now only to firms that are able to hire an additional worker under the Plus1 program.

### **Strategy #5**

#### **Ensure that the services Maine households need in order to maintain a good job are available to them.**

For Maine families to hold a steady job that pays an acceptable wage, they must have access to affordable quality child care, dependable transportation, and opportunities to improve and upgrade their knowledge and skills. The policies of the State of Maine concerning these services and opportunities should reflect their important role in the movement to end hunger.

**Child Care.** The availability of quality affordable child care is one of the most critical elements to ending hunger for many Maine families because it is fundamental to enabling parents to hold a steady job and to improve their income. Progress was made in the last session of the Maine Legislature to improve access to better child care opportunities in Maine. The “Start me Right” program is an important first step, but the momentum must be maintained and a stable funding stream needs to be secured. Maine must work toward ensuring that child care services in Maine offer the following criteria

1. Accessible. Services need to be conveniently located and widely available. In a time when many people are working into the evening, weekend shifts, and a night, services that accommodate work schedules are essential though rare today.
2. Affordable.
3. Safe and nurturing.

**Transportation Services and Options.** Reliable transportation to work is equally fundamental to holding a steady job. The Commission heard repeated testimony concerning the need for better transportation services and access at the hearings held last year.

With little exception, Maine is a state of small towns and low density settlement. The State has followed the same suburban trend as the nation. Few people live in the same neighborhood where they work. And, because of Maine’s rural character, public transportation systems are confined to urban centers and a few major connector routes. The cost of expanding



such services into more rural areas is prohibitive, making a dependable motor vehicle a necessity for most households.

Therefore, the Commission believes that Maine must take a multi-modal approach to the transportation needs of its citizens, and especially its lower wage workers, that includes both programs to increase the availability of low cost loans to low income workers so they can obtain a dependable vehicle and includes designing and financing transit systems that, like child care, provide services to accommodate changing work schedules. Many jobs in the trade and service sectors of our economy do not operate on an 8 to 5 day. Workers need busses that run until 9 or 10 p.m. when most such establishments close.

Maine's land use and development policies need also to be reviewed to ensure that they are designed to reduce sprawl, build affordable housing near transportation routes, strengthen neighborhoods, and create economic development in centers and within the community, as it is these policies that weigh heavily on making affordable transportation available.

**Lifelong Learning and Skill Development.** The third fundamental requirement to ensuring workers have quality jobs with adequate earnings is availability of opportunities for lifelong learning and skill development. Affordability and access issues concerning higher education opportunities and adult education programs need to be examined. Maine should seize the opportunities that avail themselves through expanding technology, including television, the Internet, remote access and other means. Help to small businesses to offer worker development opportunities in the workplace is also a critical strategy because it will increase their productivity and viability as well as improving worker skills.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

As is the case with several other strategies to end hunger that are proposed in this report which require a new look at policies and programs beyond the scope of this Commission, we make no specific recommendation.

**However, the Commission believes that Maine should move with urgency to ensure that Maine has:**

- a. Quality, safe, affordable, and nurturing child care within access of all working families;
- b. Expanded services to assist low income households purchase a vehicle where needed;
- c. An improved and expanded public transportation system to accommodate changing work patterns and schedules;
- d. Support for smaller businesses to improve worker skills; and

- e. Lifelong learning opportunities available to every citizen.

### Future Actions for Consideration

1. Accelerate the development of a community college system in Maine.
2. Develop programs that parallel the TANF vehicle loan program to make low cost loans available to low income workers so they can obtain a dependable vehicle.
3. Increase funding support to public transit systems to enable them to expand the hours of operation to accommodate changing work schedules.
4. Explore ways to create alternatives to conventional transportation services to accommodate special needs, appropriate to the rural/low density nature of Maine communities.

### **3. *Maine's Food System***

The system for delivering food in America has transformed from one where most households produced their own food to a system where less than 3% of the population is engaged in agriculture, from neighborhood stores and local markets to malls and supermarkets where food from all over the world appears fresh daily on the shelves. Over the years, the networks and systems that linked consumers with those who grow their food have been replaced by massive global distribution systems.

The structure of our food system today is a lost opportunity for Maine food producers and Maine consumers. While nearly everyone appreciates the chance to have fresh orange juice from Florida or coffee from South America, or some fresh crisp lettuce on the coldest days of winter, the extent to which what Maine people eat is dependent on distant sources has gone far beyond this level. The vast majority of the Maine population today have little knowledge of what food is produced in Maine or how to access it, nor do they know its true nutritional value. The Task Force on Agricultural Vitality reported to the Maine Legislature in January, 2000 findings that question the efficiency of our current system and the nutritional outcomes. They quote a USDA study that found that many fruits and vegetables lose up to 60% of their nutritional value and flavor within 48 hours after harvesting and that over half of the trucks traveling the nation's roads are carrying food. Locally produced foods can be delivered to consumers far more quickly and efficiently, vastly reducing the energy costs associated with transportation and increasing the nutritional quality.

There are gaps in the food distribution system in Maine. In spite of Maine farms producing \$500 million worth of farm products each year, most of the food consumed in Maine comes from other places while many Maine farms struggle to survive and some farmers even go hungry themselves. Only a small portion of Maine citizens purchase food regularly at a farm stand, farmer's market, or from a local farm. For Maine farms, the state's 1.2 million population represents a largely untapped market that could substantially increase agricultural production in Maine and expand the rural economy of the State. The diverse range of crops grown on Maine farms is greater than in most other states, but there are regional differences that create uneven access to food items for consumers and uneven access to Maine markets for smaller farms. Isolation of those in rural poverty, distance and access to farm markets, stands, and even to supermarkets that lie on the outskirts of town, lack of public transportation, and loss of mobility of our seniors and others with disabilities make access to good food difficult for a large portion of those with lower incomes.

Therefore, Maine must rebuild and in some cases reinvent the foundations that make it possible for Maine consumers, especially lower income consumers, to have access to affordable food from Maine farms and that provide Maine's farms better access to the region's consumers. Maine State government has both a policy role and a role in facilitating activities that increase the consumption of Maine grown food.

## Strategy #1

Increase consumer access to and consumption of Maine grown food, especially for lower income consumers.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions**

#### **1. Ensure interim funding for the Senior FarmShare Program and expand the Program to other low and moderate income households over a period of time.**

The Maine Senior FarmShare program was by all reports, a resounding success that provided significant income to many of Maine farms and provided fresh produce to over 5000 seniors directly and several thousand more indirectly through food pantries and senior meal sites. However, it served only a small fraction of the eligible seniors and did not serve other needy low income families. At this time, funding for future years is uncertain. Even if fully funded at the level proposed in the Farm Bill, the prospects for increasing the number of seniors served in Maine are not bright. In addition, there are many non-elderly low and moderate income Maine households that could benefit greatly from such a program.

Therefore, the Commission recommends that, first, funding to continue the program through the next crop season be secured and, second, begin to expand the benefits of the program to more farms and more needy consumers.

The program offers an opportunity to achieve far greater benefits for both the State's farms and its citizens. The Commission recommends the program be focused to improve the nutrition of Maine citizens and their knowledge of healthy eating so that long term changes in eating habits occur. It should also be a vehicle to engage more of Maine citizens in the habit of seeking out and purchasing Maine farm products. Once the value of the share is exhausted, share holders should have an interest in continuing to purchase their food from local farms or selecting Maine grown food in stores.

### **Future Actions for Consideration**

1. Develop structures to enhance farmers markets and direct marketing opportunities.
2. Improve labeling of locally grown produce in grocery stores so consumers can make a conscious choice when shopping for food in grocery stores.

3. Distinguish between “farm stands” operated by farms and generic produce stands that sell non-local produce or are operated as commercial enterprises not connected to a farm’s effort to direct market their production, and provide a special designation & signage recognizable to the consumer for farm stands.
4. Provide better information about the values of buying Maine grown food and make information about Maine grown food products more accessible.
5. Develop demonstration projects to identify catalysts and systems that work to bring producers and consumers together.

## **Strategy #2**

**Make better use of Maine grown food by developing infrastructure to increase the capacity of Maine farms to supply a consistent, quality product and by realigning the distribution system.**



## **Immediate Legislative Actions**

### **1. Create a public-private demonstration food processing venture (small scale commercial).**

Food processing/storage in Maine has become limited to a handful of freezer operations and a number of small scale licensed kitchens, none of which are generally available for the processing and preservation of Maine farm produce. Maine has virtually no canneries today and has none of the newer technology for food preservation, such as dehydration. The State’s short growing season makes investment in such as a private venture financially unfeasible. Some of the seasonal surplus is retrieved through gleaning efforts, but most is lost. Maine food products could become more widely available if surpluses during the short fresh market season could be turned into food preparations or preserved food products. A processing facility could be designed to combine the needs of farmers to utilize surplus produce with an opportunity for Maine’s network of food pantries, congregate meal sites, meals on wheels programs and others to process surplus food and disseminate it during the off season. It would have added value to producers by stabilizing markets and prices during the fresh sales season.

### **2. Increase the amount of Maine Grown food products in school meals and in use by other public institutions.**

In the 1980s the Maine Legislature enacted an “Institutional Buying Law”, but a number of barriers prevented both Maine farms and institutions from reaping the full benefits of the law. A broader approach is needed that includes getting more Maine farm products approved for schools to acquire under the USDA surplus commodity program, incentives such as assistance to

institutions to overcome the barriers to using local products, and assistance to farmers who wish to participate.

### Further Actions for Consideration:

1. Increase the amount of Maine foods served at public events sponsored by the State, and encourage other public entities to use more Maine produced food in the meals served.
2. Create support for community gardens and gardening generally, including community kitchens to assist families to preserve and store produce.
3. Assist small farms to develop and implement strategies to gain access to larger or more distant markets through collective marketing, cooperative marketing, developing season extender crops and other new technology and by other means.
4. Assist the development of infrastructure, including storage, transportation and distribution facilities and other systems needed to improve market access for farms throughout the state.
5. Increase the investment in technology (State, University) to develop appropriate scale equipment for small farms, season extender technology, testing services (especially nutritional content of foods and quality testing).
6. Create a special micro loan fund for purchasing or adapting equipment to improve efficiency and productivity of small farms and farms engaged in the production of new crops that require new yet unavailable equipment and technology.
7. Stop the erosion of family farms by preserving and protecting the infrastructure that is left, including making available proper land use tools to protect farmland from encroachment, support for farm stands by exempting them from “commercial uses” criteria, reducing the effects of sprawl pressures, and shielding farmland from the effect of rising taxes associated with development.

#### ***4. Systems and resources to respond to new needs that are created by changing lifestyles, culture and values.***

It has become an economic necessity that, in the majority of Maine families, both parents are working. There are more people in the workforce today than ever in our past. Household structure has changed significantly over the past couple decades, increasing the portion of single parent households and single individuals living alone. Our homes have changed and the technology with which they are run has changed. The products available in the supermarket have changed from basic staples to a myriad of packaged and convenience foods. In the fast paced nature of life there is lack of time to prepare foods, lack of space and materials needed to effect savings by processing and storing food in season, lack of knowledge of good nutrition, or of how to prepare healthy meals.

In many homes today, the parent(s) leave for work before the child goes to school and no one is available to make sure the child starts off with a good breakfast or has adequate nutrition throughout the day. Stigma keeps many children from accepting school lunch and many adults from seeking help at pantries or from social service agencies. Illiteracy keeps others from reading recipes or food labels or comparing prices. All of these factors were described at length by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Hunger and Food Security in their report in 1996. Input from hearings held by the commission and other efforts to gather data confirm them to be chronic problems in our society.

##### **Strategy #1**

**Maine must move toward a system of universal school nutrition in which all children receive healthful food at school without charge.**

##### **SCHOOL NUTRITION**

Last year the Maine Legislature made the funds available for starting new school breakfast programs non-lapsing and the eligibility requirements were lowered so that more schools can qualify for aid to establish breakfast programs.

The quality and availability of food to children in Maine schools is a special concern to the Commission. Schools are a pivotal access point for ending hunger because almost all children are educated in a school setting and meal service in the school ensures that children are receiving an adequate diet in their early years. Schools also offer an opportunity at an early age to instill knowledge of healthy eating and develop lifelong behavior and practice of good nutrition.

Yet, at public hearings across the State held by the Maine Millennium Commission on Hunger & Food Security, concern over school nutrition was raised by the public more often by far than any other issue. The Commission heard countless reports of children at school hungry,

the stigma associated with participating in school meals programs, and numerous actions, rules, and events that serve as disincentives to participation. For this reason, the commission believes the topic deserves special attention.

The data shows that less than half of all children in Maine schools participate in the school lunch program. Fewer than a fifth participate in a breakfast program. The reasons are many. Though school lunch is offered in almost all schools today, the breakfast program is far less available. Children and their parents cite unappealing menus, lack of time in the schedule for getting through the cafeteria line, and stigma. Stigma is the major reason for lack of participation in school nutrition programs by low income students.

The link between learning and nutrition is well established. To reach their full potential, every child needs a nutritious breakfast and a balanced lunch regardless of the family's income or capacity to otherwise provide for the nutritional needs of the child. Yet many skip lunch rather than face embarrassment or because the school schedule does not allow time. Many come to school without breakfast in the morning because parents leave for work before the child goes off to school and there is no time to prepare food or local rules prohibit the child from eating once on the bus.

Because of the extent of childhood hunger, the way hunger affects learning and child development, and the important role food plays in quality educational and enrichment activities, many states have passed legislation that support increased participation in school nutrition programs. Programs that offer meals to all children regardless of income, otherwise known as Universal School Nutrition Programs, have been piloted successfully. North Carolina has allocated \$1.2 million dollars so that all kindergarten children receive a free breakfast. During the past 3 years, Massachusetts provided \$3 million dollars each year to fund 16 universal school breakfast pilots. This year, \$7 million dollars will be proposed allowing 245 schools to serve universal breakfast. Maryland began its universal classroom breakfast program in 1998. In the first year, six schools participated. This year, 48 schools will be subsidized with additional funds. In Maryland, an astounding 90% of the students participate in the universal breakfast program model – a 40% increase in participation over 3 years. (*FRAC Building Blocks Newsletter*, January-February, 2001)

Maine's children deserve the opportunity to healthy accessible food in school in a setting without bias. School Nutrition programs deserve to have innovative funding available to creatively design well-staffed, well-equipped foodservice options meeting the needs of the families in their school district. As Commissioners, we have heard all too often that schools do not have the funds to adequately design, implement and maintain the creative aspects of a meal program that is able to compete with vending machines and fast food restaurants. The issue is not about improving a nutrition program that is poor quality. In fact, Maine's School Nutrition Program is very progressive. The Commission's proposal is in direct response to the voices of citizens from across the state. It is about providing a solution for thousands of Maine children who may not achieve their full potential because of a lack of food and about allowing our state School Nutrition Program move forward without politics.



The School Nutrition Program through USDA is one of the most highly regulated programs in Federal government. The intent of this Commission is to support creative growth in program development and student participation despite the many regulations that the program must abide by. A universal program will eliminate the barriers that prevent participation to school nutrition programs.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions:**

**1. Make it the policy of the State of Maine to provide school nutrition services without charge in all Maine schools in order to eliminate the stigma suffered by children under the current fee system and to direct the Maine Department of Education to prepare a plan and timeline for implementation of a universal nutrition program in all Maine schools.**

**2. Assure that each local school district includes the School Nutrition Program in the policy development process and the budget development process, in a manner that reflects the role of nutrition in the learning and nurturing of children, and makes it an integral part of the education experience for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.**

The single largest barrier to enabling school nutrition programs to meet the nutritional needs of children is the funding structure, which places its dependence on federal dollars, and the minimal importance assigned to the meals program and its budget by local school boards. In far too many schools, the school meals programs are, at best, an unwanted stepchild.

The school nutrition program should be an integral part of the school day, linked to the learning results curriculum, using mealtime as learning experience as well as a nourishing experience. Yet today, not only are the nutrition programs separated from classroom experiences, in most schools, the budget for school nutrition is separate from the overall school budget. Those responsible for the meals must operate in such a way that the program pays for itself, often forcing staff to offer less healthy snack foods in order to get children to purchase the meals. In such an environment, pressure to make ends meet consumes energy and dedication of the nutrition staff. The budget and policy process should prioritize fresh, healthy food for each child in Maine schools.

The legislature should instruct the Department of Education, in their upcoming scheduled review of the standards and performance indicators, to develop and propose the incorporation of information on nutrition and food production and its relationship to good health and to begin to develop an alternative budgeting system, such as possibly a dedicated account, that makes school meals programs a sound investment for local schools.

### **3. Institute right away a “free cart” available in all schools for all students containing healthy snacks, such as apples, vegetables, milk, crackers, etc. with emphasis on Maine foods.**

During the last legislative session, funds for starting new school breakfast programs were made non-lapsing and the eligibility requirements lowered so that more schools can qualify. This is an important step to expanding school nutrition services to Maine children. Yet, large numbers of schools will go unserved, and it will not take away the problems associated with the current fee system. To make food widely available to children, the legislature should direct the Department of Education to work with local schools and with the Maine and US Departments of Agriculture and others to offer a “free cart” of food.

Such systems for providing food to children are used widely in schools in this country and have had high success rates. In the spring of 2001 Providence R.I. schools began a pilot program intended to erase what they identified as “the stigma associated with school breakfast being a program for poor kids” in order to increase participation. They offered children in 4 middle schools an alternative style breakfast which they called “grab ‘n’ go” in which students got their breakfast in a colorful bag that they could eat anywhere. By the time the year ended, student participation in the breakfast program had increased 79% and the program was expanded to all of the city’s middle schools in the fall of 2001.

Free food carts are also widely available to students throughout the schools of Maine on the days that MEA tests are given. It is clear that teachers and administrators understand the relationship between good nutrition and academic performance. Children should have no less every school day. Their education depends upon it.

#### **Future Actions for Consideration:**

1. Establish a policy and incentives to reduce the amount of unhealthy snacks in vending machines on school campuses. A recent USDA study has found that vending machines undermine the school lunch program as well as compromise the nutrition of children.
2. Explore options for ensuring snacks available in schools are nutritious:

- a. Set nutritional standards for items in vending machines on school grounds.
  - b. Set quality standards.
  - c. Require a portion of the revenues go to fund nutrition programs.
- 1. Increase amount of Maine products in school meals.
- 2. Get more Maine products on donated commodities lists for Maine schools.
- 3. Expand and increase the availability of the “Ag in the Classroom” program and make it a part of the learning results curriculum.
- 4. Expand meals services to after school child care programs.

### **Strategy #2**

**Update nutrition information and resources and make them more accessible, interesting, easy to comprehend and compatible with today’s life styles, and expand nutrition education programs that promote the economic and health benefits of food grown in Maine.**

For most of the general public, nutrition education draws a “ho hum” reaction. Even though most know good nutrition is important to their well-being, they perceive it to be dry, complicated, and even preaching and most believe that to practice good eating habits requires more work, more time, and a change in lifestyle.

This perception is in part due to the fragmented efforts that have been in place to deliver nutrition-related information to consumers in a way that is meaningful, useful, and fits into their lifestyle. Nutrition information and education efforts need to be carefully targeted.

The nutrition information consumers have needs constant updating. The way in which nutrients interact in the body to promote health is a rapidly changing science. Micro-nutrients, phytochemicals and antioxidants are examples of substances not known to science a decade ago that are now known to be essential for health. People need new information in order to make good food choices.

The food we eat today is very different, too, and conventional knowledge of nutrition is no longer enough to guide us safely. We consume fewer home produced and preserved foods and increasingly rely on convenience foods, prepared foods, take out foods, all of which offer highly varied nutritional quality, an many of which contain excessive quantities of unhealthy ingredients and very little nutrition.

A very small portion of food consumed by Maine residents today is purchased directly from producers and few structure their diets around food in season or fresh food purchased and processed for later use. A substantial number of consumers no longer have the knowledge even of how to simply prepare many fresh vegetables.

Therefore, a renewed program of nutrition information is needed focused on updating knowledge to reflect new information on nutrition, getting people to pay more attention to what they're eating and make better choices, and to help people increase the use of more locally produced food in their diets.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions:**

#### **1. Invest in a nutrition information initiative that recognizes eating habits, consumer interests and lifestyles and promotes the economic and health benefits of food grown in Maine.**

Within Maine there are several organizations that have a role to play in providing nutritional information to consumers. Coordination occurs largely through the Maine Nutrition Network, but has been focused primarily on providing nutrition information to consumers in the food stamp and WIC programs. There is a need to develop new materials and techniques in order to reach a broader segment of the general public with targeted information that is meaningful, useful, and fits into their lifestyle.

### **Future Actions for Consideration:**

1. Encourage supermarkets to display more nutrition facts with products in their stores to help customers pick healthy foods and increase consumer interest in healthy choices.
2. Provide farmers, farmers' markets and other direct marketing outlets with informative nutrition materials for display or use in assisting customers.

### **Strategy #3**

**Ensure the services necessary for a growing elderly population are in place.**

The elderly population faces many unique challenges. Decreasing mobility and declining health affects appetite and the ability to obtain and prepare food. The disposable income of seniors is dwindling as costs of essential needs such as heating costs, rising medical costs, or the cost of prescription drugs rise, all leaving less money for food. Many seniors have very low income, especially women over age 85. Many also struggle to maintain their independence and pride and resist asking for help.

Maine has historically had a higher percentage of its population over age 65. Meeting the needs of a growing elderly population will be compounded and the systems and resources available stretched to new limits in the coming decades as the huge population of persons born in the “baby boom” years that World War II reach their senior years.

Although many elderly live longer and are healthier than their predecessors, many will not have the financial resources or the health to maintain an independent life style and will require assistance and support.

#### Future Actions for Consideration:

1. Convene a multi-agency task force to plan for the needs of a growing elderly population.
2. Expanded meals on wheels programs.
3. Consider establishing a triple tax exemption for elderly.
4. Implement EBT for food stamps and other services to ensure anonymity and thus increase participation, especially of the elderly.
5. Decentralize services that may be delivered to the client vs. client come to the service.

#### **Strategy #4**

##### Develop alternative approaches to overcome barriers of various groups of citizens to obtain locally produced food.

Many low income citizens, especially those in urban areas, the elderly, and others find it difficult to get to farmers' markets and farm stands, or to purchase fresh food in bulk direct from area farmers because they lack transportation or have health limitations that prevent access, or find the hours of operation of such markets too distant, limited or in inconvenient locations.

The Commission recognizes that there may not be a single solution, but instead, many different solutions that vary according to the local need. Nonprofit agencies who serve low income clients at nutritional risk are often the first resource to which persons in need turn, and as such are in a prime position to act as a catalyst to develop creative solutions that link their clients and area farmers by addressing barriers such as lack of transportation, access, and affordability, and have the opportunity to create solutions that work on a small scale. We believe that often the best solutions can be designed on a local small scale and that incentives and resources to encourage such should be provided.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions:**

- 1. Create a demonstration fund that can be used by agencies to act as a catalyst to develop systems for linking lower income clients and local farmers that will overcome transportation problems and other difficulties lower income individuals have in gaining access to affordable and healthy local food and will reestablish direct purchasing links between consumers and Maine farms.**

## ***5. A Seamless System of Services for those in Need.***

Because the Commission has also found that a confusing and sometimes conflicting myriad of programs, policies and guidelines exist to fill the gap for people in immediate need of assistance, and because ending hunger requires significant changes that will not be accomplished quickly or easily, we also recommend the State move toward a more seamless system where no person falls through the cracks.

Too many people are falling through the cracks or suffering unnecessary delays in receiving the help they need because of gaps in eligibility for various services, humiliation suffered by those who seek help due to inadequately trained staff and volunteers and, especially, for those who are in need for the first time, a lack of any clear entry point or guide to help sort through the programs available and find the ones they need.

The commission heard both from the public and from front line providers that the system for providing aid is complex and cumbersome, often involves a maze of programs, guidelines, and rules that make for great inefficiency and leave people in need falling through the cracks in the system. Providers find they must seek funding from multiple sources, each source having guidelines and categories of need that it can address, and yet see clients routinely that do not fit any of the programs with which they can offer aid.

The stigma associated with having to seek help is the most devastating blow to self confidence, especially at a time when all else seems bleak. It is also what keeps many from seeking help until their situation has reached crisis proportions and the road back has become long and difficult. It is essential to address the problem of stigma associated with seeking help. Maine should ensure that stigma is eliminated from services that are means tested. The implicit and explicit culture that blames the victim is present today and must change.



### **Immediate Legislative Actions:**

**1. Ensure that where the parameters and requirements of one program leave off, the eligibility for another take up.**

**providing no gaps through which populations in need may fall.**

Departments and agencies offering services to alleviate hunger and assist citizens in crisis should be directed to review their programs and guidelines to ensure that services are available for all in need, and to work jointly to establish a single point of entry to make it easy for those in need for the first time to find help with ease and dignity.

**Future Actions for Consideration:**

1. Accelerate the use of EBT (electronic benefit transfer) cards for food stamps and WIC and expand to other services to avoid stigma often associated with services.